United Nations A/54/918–S/2000/581

General Assembly
Security Council

Distr.: General
16 June 2000

Original: English

General Assembly
Fifty-fourth session
Agenda item 50
The situation in Afghanistan and its implications for international peace and security

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Fifty-fifth year

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Report of the Secretary-General

I. Introduction

1. The present report is submitted pursuant to paragraph 31 of General Assembly resolution 54/189 A of 17 December 1999, in which the Assembly requested the Secretary-General to report every three months during its fifty-fourth session on the progress of the United Nations Special Mission to Afghanistan (UNSMA). The present report, which covers developments since the issuance of my first quarterly report of 10 March 2000 (A/54/791-S/2000/205), is also submitted in response to requests by the Security Council for regular information on the main developments in Afghanistan.

II. Recent developments in Afghanistan

A. Activities of my Personal Representative and of the Special Mission

Contacts with the Afghan parties

2. My Personal Representative for Afghanistan and Head of UNSMA, Francesc Vendrell, has visited Afghanistan on three occasions during the reporting period. He twice held talks with the Taliban Foreign Minister, Wakil Ahmad Mutawakkil, first in Kabul on 13 April and then in Kandahar on 25 May. He also had a meeting in Kandahar on 27 April with the Governor of the Province, Mullah Mohammad Hassan Rahmani, and with Deputy Foreign Minister Mullah Abdul Jalil Akhund. On 28 May, Mr. Vendrell received visiting Deputy Foreign Minister Jalil at the UNSMA office in Islamabad. Mr. Vendrell also travelled to Dushanbe on 19 April for talks with Commander Ahmad Shah Massoud, Haji Abdul Qadir, ex-Governor of Nangarhar Province and Shiite commander Sayid Hussain Anwari, a leader of the Harakat-e-Islami. My Personal Representative also had meetings in May with other United Front leaders, including Mr. Mohammad Karim Khalili of the Hezb-e-Wahdat, General Abdul Rashid Dostum of the Jombesh-e-Melli-ye Islami-ye Afghanistan, and Mr. Ismail Khan, former Governor of Herat. Further talks with the United Front and Taliban senior officials were held on the margins of a meeting of the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC) in Jeddah in early May.

3. In his contacts with the parties, my Personal Representative conveyed the tenor of the discussions that took place in informal consultations and meetings of the Security Council as well as the contents of the

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presidential statement adopted by the Security Council on 7 April 2000 (S/PRST/2000/12). In so doing, he underlined the Council's deep concern at reports that both parties to the conflict were preparing for renewed large-scale fighting and the consequences that might ensue if the Council's concerns were not heeded. While neither side gave any clear commitment, both declared that any military actions by their respective sides would be purely defensive in nature.

4. Other issues discussed by my Personal Representative included ideas as to how a peace process under United Nations auspices might be structured; the establishment of a broadly based, multi-ethnic, fully representative government and the role therein of Mullah Mohammad Omar; the relations of the two sides with outside Powers, including Pakistan, the Islamic Republic of Iran, the Central Asian republics, the Russian Federation and the United States of America; the Security Council's demand contained in paragraph 2 of its resolution 1267 (1999) of 15 October 1999 that the Taliban turn over Osama bin Laden as well as the broader issue of terrorism and, more concretely, the alleged existence of training camps for foreign militants in areas controlled by the Taliban; the continued interference of third countries in the affairs of Afghanistan and the presence of foreigners in the fighting ranks of the Taliban; issues related to the production of and trade in narcotics; the impact of the escape of Ismail Khan from a Kandahar prison; relations among the various Northern Alliance leaders, including Massoud, Dostum and Malik; and the perception of the two warring parties of the eventual convening of a *loya jirgah*, or a traditional grand assembly, as advocated by non-belligerent Afghan third parties such as the Rome process and the Cyprus meeting.

5. In reply the two sides reiterated their well-known positions, set forth in my previous report (A/54/791-S/2000/205, paras. 4 and 5) on the establishment of a broad-based government and on the role that would be accorded to Mullah Omar in it. Each side vehemently complained about persistent outside interference in support of the other side. The Taliban, while acknowledging the presence in their territory of foreigners who had participated in the "jihad" against the former Soviet Union, denied the existence of training camps on their soil and repeated their condemnation of terrorism and their willingness to maintain friendly relations with the Governments of all the neighbouring countries. On the issue of Osama bin Laden, they maintained the position that Mr. bin Laden had taken up residence in Afghanistan under a previous regime, that he had been a leading participant in the "jihad" and that Afghan traditions of hospitality prevented them from surrendering Mr. bin Laden against his will. As an alternative to Mr. bin Laden's voluntary departure, an option which the Taliban recently said they would foster, the Taliban again proposed that he be tried in Afghanistan by a court composed of *ulemas* drawn from Afghanistan, Saudi Arabia and a third Islamic country.

6. Regarding the production and trade of illicit drugs, the Taliban reminded my Personal Representative that this had been a longstanding problem in Afghanistan and expressed willingness to progressively eliminate drug production, as advocated by Mullah Omar, provided the international community was willing to commit the necessary material resources for the cultivation of alternative crops.

7. Mr. Vendrell asked the two parties not to target the civilian population in the event of fighting, in line with the Security Council's condemnation of such a practice most recently expressed in its presidential statement of 7 April 2000 (S/PRST/2000/12), and discussed issues related to the release of political prisoners and prisoners of war. He also raised with the Taliban allegations of serious human rights violations and reports of the dismissal of female civil servants from government service, as well as broader gender issues.

8. On the question of the dismissal of civil servants, the Taliban Foreign Minister gave the explanation that a lack of economic resources had forced the Taliban to eliminate a large number of positions in the civil service and that this had inevitably had a negative impact on women, since they were receiving a salary without actually working. It may be recalled that, following strong protests by the international community about the wholesale dismissal of female employees from the civil service shortly after the Taliban took over Kabul, female employees had been able to continue to draw their salaries without being allowed to perform their jobs.

9. My Personal Representative visited Rome on 12 and 13 June for a meeting with the former King of Afghanistan, Zahir Shah, and members of his entourage, as well as for talks with senior officials of

the Italian Government. My Personal Representative has also held numerous meetings with independent Afghan personalities in Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and the Islamic Republic of Iran, including many who are supportive of the *loya jirgah* process.

Other activities, including contact with concerned Governments

10. At the invitation of the Government of the People's Republic of China, my Personal Representative paid an official visit from 13 to 15 March to Beijing, where he held consultations with the Vice Minister for Foreign Affairs, Wang Guangya, and other senior Foreign Ministry officials. He also visited Ashgabat from 16 to 18 April in response to an invitation from the Government of Turkmenistan. During his visit Mr. Vendrell held meetings with the President of Turkmenistan, Saparmurat Niyazov, and with the Minister for Foreign Affairs, Boris Shikhmuradov. Both the Government of China and the Government of Turkmenistan reiterated their neutral stand on Afghanistan and their readiness to assist the United Nations in its efforts towards peace. The Government of Turkmenistan also reiterated its willingness to assist in bringing the Afghan warring parties together and to host further rounds of intra-Afghan talks.

11. In response to an invitation from the Government of India, my Personal Representative paid a visit to Delhi from 2 to 5 May. He was received by the Minister for External Affairs, Jaswant Singh, and held extensive discussions with the Foreign Secretary, Lalit Man Singh, as well as with other senior officials from the Prime Minister's Office and the Ministry of External Affairs. Since his arrival in Islamabad, Mr. Vendrell has maintained intensive contacts with Pakistani officials, including the Minister for Foreign Affairs, Abdul Sattar, the Foreign Secretary, Inam-ul-Haque, and other senior Foreign Ministry officials, as well as with the Director-General of the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), Lieutenant General Mahmud Ahmed. He also had extensive talks with Iranian officials during the OIC-led talks in Jeddah and his subsequent visit to Tehran in mid-May, including with the Deputy Foreign Minister for Legal and International Affairs, Mohammad Javad Zarif, and the Deputy Foreign Minister for Asia and Oceania, Mohsen Aminzadeh. Mr. Vendrell met on 26 May with the United States Under-Secretary of State for Political Affairs, Thomas Pickering, during the latter's visit to Pakistan. The topics discussed at all these meetings included the situation in Afghanistan and its implications for regional and international security, prospects for peace and means of achieving a lasting settlement, the role of the United Nations, including the Security Council and other international organizations and mechanisms, terrorism and drug trafficking.

12. UNSMA, in the meantime, has strengthened its presence in the region with the opening of its liaison office in Tehran, headed by the Deputy Head of the Special Mission, and with the appointment of one of its Political Affairs Officers to head the UNSMA office in Kabul.

Activities of the Civil Affairs Unit

13. The UNSMA Civil Affairs Unit continued its deployment in Afghanistan. Its offices in Faizabad, which is currently under the control of the United Front, as well as those in Herat, Kabul and Kandahar are all now operational and an office in Jalalabad is expected to open shortly. Permission has so far been denied by the Taliban to open an office in the northern city of Mazar-e-Sharif, where the situation is tense. Pending a more permanent arrangement, the Civil Affairs Unit will nonetheless attempt to visit the area regularly.

14. With the recent arrival of an additional Civil Affairs Officer, the Civil Affairs Unit now comprises six officers and a Coordinator. It is hoped that the Civil Affairs Unit will be augmented by five more officers before the end of this year, for a total of two per office within Afghanistan.

15. The Civil Affairs Unit has begun to develop close ties with Afghans, in particular with regional and provincial authorities including the judiciary, traditional leaders such as tribal elders and those elements of civil society that remain after 20 years of turmoil. Given the traditionally loose organization of the Afghan State and the consequent autonomy of many regional authorities, each Civil Affairs office will need to adapt its approach to the situation prevailing in each locality. Since the Unit will attempt to address human rights problems and prevent future abuses through persuasion rather than denunciation, the Unit's officers must be conscious of local traditions and customs in their dealings with Afghans.

B. Other political developments

Talks in Jeddah sponsored by the Organization of the Islamic Conference

16. As mentioned in my previous report, a diplomatic initiative was launched in February by President Sayyed Mohammad Khatami of the Islamic Republic of Iran in his capacity as Chairman of OIC. That initiative led to the convening at Jeddah from 7 to 9 March 2000 of a first round of talks, with the participation of my Personal Representative as an observer. Although the meeting achieved no concrete results, the two warring factions had agreed to participate in another round of indirect talks after the haj season.

17. The second round of indirect talks between the two warring factions was held at Jeddah from 8 to 10 May, again with the participation of my Personal Representative as an observer. The talks were once more conducted under the chairmanship of Iranian Deputy Foreign Minister Zarif. The Taliban delegation was headed by its Minister of Education, Mullah Amir Khan Muttaqi, while that of the United Front was led by Dr. Abdullah, the Acting Minister for Foreign Affairs of the Islamic State of Afghanistan. The talks concluded with an agreement for a comprehensive exchange of prisoners of war between the two sides, to be conducted through the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC). A special team consisting of representatives of the Islamic Republic of Iran, Pakistan, UNSMA and the OIC secretariat was set up to help facilitate the implementation of the agreement. The two sides also agreed to respect their existing commitments not to target the civilian population and to allow the unimpeded passage of humanitarian convoys to the civilian population on both sides of the front lines. To my regret, the agreement on exchange of prisoners has so far not been implemented. However, recent signals that there may be some progress on this issue are encouraging.

Developments among Afghan factions

18. In early March, UNSMA received reports that the two Uzbek Generals, Dostum and Malik, had met in the eastern Iranian city of Mashhad and had agreed to bury their past differences and reunite their party. This event was followed shortly afterwards by a reported meeting in the Uzbek city of Termez between General Dostum and Commander Massoud to discuss a renewed military alliance against the Taliban.

19. On 26 March, the former Governor of Herat, Ismail Khan, who had been a prisoner of the Taliban since his capture in 1997, escaped from a Kandahar jail in the company of two other senior United Front commanders. The Taliban security forces, in search of the fugitives, broke into United Nations premises in Kandahar on three occasions, leading to their temporary closure. The United Nations resumed its activities in mid-April after the Humanitarian Coordinator received an apology and was given reassurances by the Taliban authorities that they remained committed to the Memorandum of Understanding concluded in 1999.

20. The Taliban-appointed Governor of Kunduz Province, Aref Khan, was shot and killed in the Pakistani city of Peshawar on 4 April. In another incident a few days later, an ex-Mujaheddin commander, Muhammad Siddiqullah, was gunned down in the same city. In both cases, the culprits fled the scene and have not been apprehended or identified so far by Pakistani law enforcement forces.

Other developments

21. United States President Bill Clinton visited India, Bangladesh and Pakistan towards the end of March. Among the issues discussed with the Pakistani leaders were terrorism and the continued presence in Afghanistan of Osama bin Laden. Pakistan's Chief Executive, General Pervez Musharraf, reiterated his readiness to raise these issues with the highest authorities of the Taliban, including Mullah Omar. These issues, as well as those related to peace and human rights in Afghanistan, have been the object of further discussions between Pakistan and the United States, including during Under-Secretary of State Pickering's visit to Islamabad in late May. While in Islamabad, Mr. Pickering met with visiting Taliban Deputy Foreign Minister Mullah Abdul Jalil, to whom he reiterated the above concerns.

22. In mid-April, the Presidents of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan met at Tashkent to discuss the security situation in the region. The four Presidents signed an agreement on joint action to fight terrorism as well as political, religious and other kinds of extremism and international organized crime, of which Afghanistan was perceived to be the source. The

Russian Federation for its part has expressed its increasing concern about the Taliban's alleged support for the Chechen rebels inside Afghanistan. On 22 May, remarks made by a Russian presidential spokesman did not exclude the possibility of "preventive strikes" against alleged Chechen rebel bases inside Afghanistan. The allegations regarding the Taliban's support for Chechen rebels as well as the spokesman's comments were strongly rejected by Mullah Omar, who stated that those countries that assisted the Russian Federation in such an act would be held responsible for the consequences. Amid rising tension, top leaders of Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, the Russian Federation, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan met in Minsk on 24 May to sign accords reinvigorating a Commonwealth of Independent States collective security treaty signed at Tashkent in 1992. The accords, which laid down the terms for mutual military assistance, were a response to "new non-traditional threats, like terrorism and extremism".

23. On 1 June, the Taliban lodged a protest with UNSMA, addressed to the Secretary-General, against Uzbekistan, alleging that the latter's aircraft had violated Afghan airspace on three occasions during the period 30-31 May. The allegation was immediately rejected by Uzbekistan.

24. Adding another source of concern to the existing problems related to Afghanistan, it was reported that Jumaboi Namangani, an Uzbek dissident, had crossed in early May from Tajikistan into northern Afghanistan, in territory held by the Taliban, with his armed followers. An official Taliban radio broadcast called the allegation baseless, since such an act would not comply with their foreign policy principles. There have also been continuous reports of the involvement of Arabs, Chechens, Pakistanis, Uygurs and other outsiders in the Afghan civil war fighting along with the Taliban. The Taliban have similarly denied these allegations.

25. It has been reported that the Islamic Republic of Iran and the Taliban have signed a cooperation agreement to jointly monitor their common border to counter illicit drug trafficking. Although the Iranian authorities contacted by UNSMA acknowledged meeting with the Taliban delegation in Mashhad, they denied that any agreement had been signed in this regard. Nonetheless, as another sign of improved relations, the Islamic Republic has dispatched several missions to the areas controlled by the Taliban in recent months.

26. The Government of Pakistan has taken steps to close the so-called Bara and similar markets, which trade in goods smuggled in through Afghanistan, in an effort to enable the collection of taxes and customs duties on these goods. The traders, mostly Pashtuns on both sides of the common border, reacted by holding a two-day strike in late April, forcing the authorities to grant them a 90-day grace period before the measures take effect. If implemented, this plan would affect the single most important source of revenue for the Taliban.

27. In mid-May, the Interior Minister of the Taliban, Mullah Abdur Razzaq, paid an official visit to Islamabad where he held discussions with Pakistani authorities on the extradition of criminals, terrorism, drug trafficking and the Afghanistan Transit Trade Agreement. On the latter issue, it was agreed by both parties that 30 items such as television and video cassette players would be eliminated from the import list (i.e., the list of goods imported tax-free into Afghanistan) to avoid the smuggling of such goods back into Pakistan.

28. The Foreign Minister of the Libyan Arab Jamahiriya, Abdul Rahman Mohammed Shalgam, while visiting Islamabad in May, held talks with various Afghans, including the Deputy Foreign Minister of the Taliban, Mullah Jalil. The Libyan Minister presented to those Afghans his country's "idea" to promote peace in Afghanistan by dispatching a group of Islamic scholars to communicate with Mullah Omar in Kandahar.

29. Pakistan's Chief Executive Musharraf paid an official visit to Ashgabat in May to meet with President Niyazov of Turkmenistan. During their meeting, the two leaders discussed plans to establish pipeline, road and railway links between the two countries via Afghanistan as well as the promotion of the restoration of peace in Afghanistan.

Activities of the "six plus two" group and the "group of 21"

30. Following a decision by the "six plus two" informal group in late February, a Technical Meeting on Drugs Emanating from Afghanistan was held at Vienna from 8 to 10 May 2000 under the auspices of the United Nations International Drug Control

Programme (UNDCP). Further information on the meeting is contained in paragraph 51 below.

31. In the region, in keeping with an understanding arrived at with the representatives of the "six plus two" Governments to hold periodic meetings convened by my Personal Representative, a first meeting of the "six plus two" group was held at Islamabad on 22 May. On 30 May, my Personal Representative convened a meeting of a larger group of Governments with influence in Afghanistan, or the "group of 21", by inviting representatives of those Governments in Islamabad. The "group of 21", which had not met since June 1998, comprises China, Egypt, France, Germany, India, the Islamic Republic of Iran, Italy, Japan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, the Netherlands, Pakistan, the Russian Federation, Saudi Arabia, Sweden, Tajikistan, Turkey, Turkmenistan, the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, the United States of America and Uzbekistan, as well as OIC.

Activities of non-belligerent Afghan groups

32. During the reporting period, supporters of the *loya jirgah* initiative, led by former King Zahir Shah, or the so-called Rome process, dispatched a delegation to United Nations Headquarters as well as to Washington to explain their activities and seek support. The delegation, which was received at Headquarters by the Assistant Secretary-General for Political Affairs, Danilo Türk, said that they would shortly send similar delegations to members of the European Union, the Russian Federation, the Islamic Republic of Iran and Pakistan as well as to the warring factions in Afghanistan. A representative of a parallel initiative called the Cyprus process also visited New York to explain its activities.

C. Military situation

33. Small- and medium-scale fighting has continued in Afghanistan throughout the reporting period. The usual winter lull came to an end on 10 March when the Taliban launched an attack against United Front positions at the northern entrance to the strategic Salang tunnel. This attack was repelled.

34. During the first half of March, the United Front gradually recaptured a number of towns in Sar-e-Pul in the district of Sang Charak in Jowzjan Province and declared on 18 March that the district was under their control. During the second half of March and the beginning of April, the entire district was retaken by the Taliban.

35. On 13 March, Taliban forces attacked positions held by the United Front in the district of Burka in the northern province of Baghlan in an apparent attempt to cut off the supply road running east of the front lines. That attack was repulsed.

36. Between the beginning of March and the end of April, Taliban forces carried out a number of attacks on Dara-e-Souf in Samangan Province. The United Front has so far been able to defend the area.

37. On 13 April, United Front local forces recaptured two districts in the province of Ghor, Saghar and Shahrak, the main parts of which were conquered by the Taliban last autumn. The fighting, still ongoing, seems to have brought with it a pattern of human rights violations, with the torching of family homes and ethnic cleansing.

38. Throughout the reporting period, both sides have continued preparations for a major organized offensive. Despite several postponements, observers believe that each side now has in place the military capacity for such an offensive. Indeed, a heavy concentration of forces was noticeable at the front lines both in the north of Kabul and in the northern provinces of Kunduz and Baghlan. Amid heightening tensions, both sides have frequently exchanged artillery shells and launched limited attacks in order to gain operationally important territory. On 7 April, the Taliban advanced from the Nejrab valley, to the north-east of Kabul, into a side valley of strategic importance, but could not hold the ground. A number of clashes occurred between 15 and 25 April at the front lines both at the Bagram airport in the north of Kabul and in the Ghorbandi valley to the north-west of Kabul. The opponents also clashed several times both at the Salang tunnel beginning on 19 May and in Kunduz as of 22 May.

39. Furthermore, increased tension was noticeable along the Afghan-Uzbek border during the first half of June, when the Taliban deployed forces mainly at Hairaton town in Balkh Province ostensibly in response to the statement by the Russian Federation regarding possible air strikes against alleged terrorist training camps inside Afghanistan.

40. The supply of weapons and other war *matériel* into Afghanistan has continued during the spring,

providing both sides with the necessary means for the expected major spring offensive. The presence of non-Afghan volunteers, mainly from religious schools in Pakistan, among the Taliban forces is reported to be significant.

III. Humanitarian activities and human rights

A. Humanitarian situation

41. The United Nations humanitarian agencies continue to experience difficulties in accessing those in need of humanitarian assistance as a result of conflict and drought. Insecurity in certain regions has been the cause of restrictions placed by the authorities on the free movement of humanitarian personnel. Since January, the United Nations has been unable to obtain agreement from the authorities for the reopening of the corridor for assistance to internally displaced persons in the Panjshir valley. Similar difficulties are being experienced in accessing displaced communities in northern Hazarajat. The United Nations continues to work with the authorities at the highest level to resolve these difficulties, although progress is slow.

42. As mentioned above, on 28 March, United Nations staff were withdrawn from Kandahar and operations suspended in the area following repeated violations of United Nations immunity by the authorities. United Nations offices were broken into, property was damaged and staff were intimidated by armed Taliban allegedly in search of escaped prisoners. Operations were resumed on 13 April after senior Taliban officials reaffirmed their commitment to uphold their agreements, to cooperate in maintaining the security of United Nations personnel, property and premises and to respect United Nations immunities in the future.

Repatriation

43. Afghans have responded positively to a special programme initiated by the Government of the Islamic Republic of Iran and the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) aimed at addressing the problem of undocumented refugees in the Islamic Republic. The Joint Programme for the Voluntary Repatriation of Afghans for the first time is offering undocumented Afghans a true choice to return home or normalize their presence in the Islamic Republic. Those who opt for voluntary repatriation receive material assistance and free passage to Afghanistan in safety and dignity.

44. Repatriation movements from the Islamic Republic began on 9 April 2000. As of 25 May, a total of 21,678 had returned under the programme through 21 organized convoy movements. In addition, 15,349 Afghan refugees were voluntarily repatriated from Pakistan. Current drought conditions, however, have led to a suspension of repatriation to the southern districts of Afghanistan.

45. The repatriation of the Afghans is a collaborative effort involving several United Nations agencies and NGOs. The International Organization for Migration (IOM) provides transport, the World Food Programme (WFP) food, the World Health Organization (WHO) and the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) medical supplies and Médecins Sans Frontières, Médecins du Monde and the International Rescue Committee medical services. The United Nations Mine Action Programme for Afghanistan provides mine awareness training to the returnees.

Drought

46. Afghanistan is currently in the grip of its worst drought since 1971. While first assessments showed the south-west of the country to be the most affected area, it has now been confirmed that the entire country has been severely affected and that long-term intervention by the international community will be required to alleviate the impact of the drought on the most vulnerable population.

47. The most seriously affected populations are livestock owners, especially the nomadic *kochi* population, and rain-fed wheat producers. The mortality rate among livestock in the most affected parts of southern Afghanistan is estimated to be in the range of 50 per cent to 60 per cent. Crop loss in the majority of rain-fed areas is 90 per cent. The next chance for a normal crop from rain-fed areas will not be until 2001, as the vast majority of the cultivated land produces only one crop per year. According to the recent food and crop assessment carried out by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) and WFP, the food production deficit will be 2.3 million tonnes, more than double the figure for 1999.

48. The drought comes at a time when much of the population is already highly vulnerable. Many people were already struggling to cope with the effects of the war and the accompanying economic crisis. Some, particularly in the Central Highlands, had to sell their assets or go into debt to cope with reduced crop production in 1999. Moreover, in the centre and north of the country people have faced conflict and displacement. A great cause of concern is the possibility of renewed fighting and the effects that war-induced displacement might have on drought-affected populations. UNHCR is providing technical assistance to the rest of the assistance community in devising possible displacement scenarios throughout the South-West Asia region and in Afghanistan in particular.

49. Lack of savings or assets and the high level of dependence on agriculture and livestock-raising mean that many families have no resources to fall back on. There is no meaningful presence of government line ministries beyond a few provincial capitals. Government structures either do not exist or simply have no capacity to assist people who find themselves with no prospect of a crop yield for the next 12 months. Migration of people from drought-affected areas to urban areas is exacerbating the employment problems.

50. In early May, the United Nations Coordinator presented an interim appeal to the donor community requesting US$ 1.8 million for immediate inputs to mitigate the effects of the drought. Following more detailed assessments, this has been updated by a strategy that seeks to provide assistance in a phased approach through the end of June 2001. The key components of this strategy are food aid and, to stabilize populations in situ, the provision of potable water, the protection of livelihoods and preventive health measures. The United Nations and its assistance partners are seeking some $67 million to finance this programme over the next 12 months.

Narcotics

51. As mentioned above, following a decision by the "six plus two" group in February, a technical meeting on the Afghanistan narcotics issue and its wider regional implications was held at Vienna from 8 to 10 May 2000 under the auspices of UNDCP. The participants agreed on practical measures to enhance the effectiveness of drug control measures in Afghanistan and in the region. The United Nations common programming approach in Afghanistan was particularly emphasized as an appropriate framework to ensure that assistance is consistent with the goal of opium poppy elimination.

52. It is worth noting that the Taliban carried out an opium poppy eradication campaign in Nangarhar Province in April 2000. About 80 hectares of opium poppy fields were destroyed along the Torkham-Jalalabad road, as well as an estimated 250 hectares in Shinwar District. While these actions are encouraging, the results have been minimal and remain rather symbolic. UNDCP is currently undertaking its annual opium poppy survey in Afghanistan; the final results should become available in September 2000.

B. Human rights

53. Afghans continue to face major human rights challenges. The most significant and intractable challenge is the war and the dynamics that feed it. The indirect and accumulated effects of warfare take an alarming toll in lives, limbs and livelihoods. The relationship between armed conflict, underdevelopment, poverty and the right to health is all too clear in terms of child morbidity and mortality. Diarrhoea, an easily preventable disease, is the number-one killer of children in Afghanistan; it is annually responsible for the deaths of 85,000 children. Despite some limited improvements, women and girls have continued to face serious abuses of their fundamental rights, including severe restrictions imposed on their participation in public life. The dismissal of female civil servants from government service is yet another sad example of the brazen violations of their rights.

54. Decades of war have had a devastating impact on traditional coping mechanisms and means of survival. Growing poverty and the limited availability of, and access to, basic social services mean that the vast majority of Afghans are denied their basic human rights. Indeed, it is all too apparent that the poor, the vulnerable and the marginalized, who for the most part constitute the same group, suffer a formidable human rights deficit. They are unable to enjoy such fundamental rights as the right to food, adequate shelter, health, education and a means of livelihood. In addition, they have little or no possibility of judicial recourse and are largely denied the possibility of shaping decisions that affect them. The deepening and fast-spreading drought is likely to exacerbate an

already difficult human rights situation. Unless more determined and committed action is taken by the international community and the relevant Afghan authorities to address the underlying causes of poverty and to invest in programmes that will strengthen the coping capabilities of the poor, the human rights challenges faced by Afghans will continue to increase.

55. The immediate and direct effects of the war are equal cause for concern. With another season of fighting on the horizon, there is every reason to fear that the pattern of targeting civilians and subjecting them to a wide range of violations will continue. Since my last report in March, it has become apparent that the indiscriminate bombing of areas that are clearly residential continues to take place. Bombing by the Taliban authorities of Taloqan on 20 May resulted in the death of a humanitarian aid worker and six of his seven children. Despite several interventions by the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Afghanistan, Kamal Hossain, the authorities have not yet provided any evidence as to why they arbitrarily detained and held without charge an aid worker, Dr. Ayub, Medical Director of Shuhada Organization, Jaghory District, who has now spent a year in detention. The aid community also faces difficulties in maintaining unhindered access to all Afghans in need of assistance; in a number of instances, the right of civilians to receive assistance has been denied, in contravention of international law.

56. Persistent reports of summary executions suggest a pattern of systematic violations of human rights. There are continuous reports that prisoners have been executed in Taliban-controlled areas in the north. It is reported that the prisoners were taken from places of detention in the Mazar and Samangan areas by Taliban troops and dumped at different areas. During military operations in Darra Souf and Sangcharak districts that have been ongoing since January 2000, there have been repeated reports of arbitrary arrests and summary executions. The latter reportedly included the killing of village elders in and around Gosfandi. The impunity that prevails in Afghanistan is a significant factor in the persistence of gross violations of human rights.

IV. Observations

57. The situation of the Afghan people remains deplorable. Four years after the takeover of Kabul by the Taliban, visitors compare the city to a bombed-out city a few years after the end of the Second World War, except that no reconstruction is in sight and its people have little hope for improvement. There is a growing process of pauperization throughout Afghanistan, exacerbated by the most severe drought in 30 years. More than 20 years after the invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 and the billions of dollars expended to feed successive war efforts, Afghanistan remains in a state of acute crisis — its resources depleted, its intelligentsia in exile, its people disfranchised, its traditional political structures shattered and its human development indices among the lowest in the world.

58. There have been occasional sparks of hope since my last report in March. My Personal Representative has established a good working relationship with the warring factions and with Governments of the neighbouring countries, all of which have conveyed to him their willingness to cooperate in the search for a peace process. The second meeting held in Jeddah under the sponsorship of OIC produced an agreement on a comprehensive exchange of prisoners of war which would, if carried out, help create an atmosphere conducive to the initiation of a political dialogue between the Afghan sides. The involvement of both the Islamic Republic of Iran and Pakistan in the OIC initiative, a process with which the United Nations has been closely associated and which has my full support, is to be welcomed. Although outside interference in Afghanistan continues, there are indications that Governments in the region are beginning to realize that their national interests would best be served by the achievement of a peaceful settlement in that country rather than through the continued sponsoring of their favoured factions. The "six plus two" group appears to be making an effort to prove its practical usefulness. The effort centred around the former King of Afghanistan, Zahir Shah, whose name retains a positive resonance among many Afghans, towards the convening of an emergency *loya jirgah* is a welcome step that should receive the encouragement of the international community as a complement to a dialogue between the warring factions.

59. For the time being, however, these developments continue to have minimal effect. Deep mutual mistrust divides the two warring sides. The exchange of prisoners agreed to in Jeddah has yet to occur. Reports of major human rights violations persist. While one of the parties still harbours hopes of a military victory, the other believes it can redress the balance of power

through gains on the ground. Strong indications suggest that a major offensive is being prepared for the near future, notwithstanding the repeated appeals of the international community, including the Security Council, with the consequent aggravation of the suffering of the civilian population. I therefore add my voice, once again, to those international appeals to the warring factions and their supporters to stop the current belligerent course of action and return to the negotiating table.

60. Furthermore, there is a growing risk of greater internationalization of the problem as a result of the increased perception that Afghan territory is being used as a base to destabilize other countries. Meanwhile, to the extent that Member States turn their attention towards Afghanistan at all, they tend to focus on isolated aspects such as terrorism, narcotics, regional security or refugees, without developing the comprehensive strategy that would help bring about an overall settlement.

61. What is now needed is for a process of dialogue to be structured among Afghans, while at the same time fostering a common understanding among those Governments that are engaged in Afghanistan, based on the acknowledgement that their legitimate interests can best be guaranteed in the context of an overall peace settlement. Such a settlement must have as its twin objectives the establishment of a broadly based, unified government respectful of Afghanistan's ethnic diversity and mutual commitments between Afghanistan and its neighbours based on the principles of non-interference and friendly relations.